

NOAA National Weather Service Appoints Manager of New Caribbean Tsunami Warning Program



Israel Matos (WFO San Juan, PR, Meteorologist-in-Charge), Christa Von Hillebrandt (Caribbean Tsunami Warning Program Manager), Bill Proenza, and Orlando Bermudez (WFO San Juan Forecasters) at a TsunamiReady presentation in 2009. (photo, WFO San Juan)

Former Puerto Rico Seismic Network Director Christa von Hillebrandt-Andrade has been selected as the manager of the newly created Caribbean Tsunami Warning Program located at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. The selection was announced by Bill Proenza, regional director of the National Weather Service Southern Region, which includes 10 southern states and portions of the Caribbean.

"Christa von Hillebrandt-Andrade is an internationally renowned expert in seismology and tsunamis," said Proenza. "This new program represents an important first step in establishing a state of the science tsunami warning center for the Caribbean and adjacent basins."

While some improvements have been made in tsunami preparedness and warnings since the December 26, 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, von Hillebrandt believes much more is needed to protect the millions of residents and visitors populating island coastlines throughout the Caribbean.

"The Caribbean region is one of the most seismically active regions in the world with a huge potential for death and destruction as evidenced by the recent earthquake in Haiti," von Hillebrandt said. "Almost 100 tsunamis have struck the shores of the Caribbean nations over the past 500 years, with the most recent deadly tsunami generated by the earthquake in Haiti. I am honored by my selection and look forward to the challenge of improving our research, education, warning and forecasting capabilities."

A part of the Southern Region, the Caribbean Tsunami Warning Program will operate in partnership with the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center at Ewa Beach in Oahu, Hawaii and the Alaska Tsunami Warning Center in Palmer, Alaska as a key participant in the NOAA National Weather Service Caribbean Tsunami Warning Program.

"Long before the earthquake and subsequent deadly tsunami in Haiti, the need for a tsunami warning program in the Caribbean was quite clear," said Proenza. "I have often noted the Caribbean Basin poses the highest potential for tsunami-related fatalities - of our own citizens as well as those of our neighbor nations throughout the region. A tsunami may not strike for a generation, but it could happen again tomorrow. Professor von Hillebrandt-Andrade's training, experience and intimate knowledge of the region makes her the ideal choice to lead a tsunami warning program which will eventually evolve into the Caribbean Tsunami Warning Center", he added.

The ranking NOAA official in the region, Proenza also serves as the head of the U.S. Delegation to the Caribbean and western Atlantic Basin's tsunami meetings conducted by the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

During her tenure at the Seismic Network (1990-2010) and as a member of the University of Puerto Rico Geology Department, von Hillebrandt-Andrade provided key leadership in the modernization, restructuring, staffing and funding of the seismic network to provide earthquake and tsunami monitoring, warning and education services. Her experience in Puerto Rico, the Caribbean and South America has afforded her a unique familiarity with a variety of natural hazards such as volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis.

The author and co-author of more than 50 journal papers and abstracts on earthquakes and tsunamis, Professor von Hillebrandt-Andrade has also served on the Puerto Rico Earthquake Safety Commission and the Puerto Rico Tsunami Technical Review Committee. She is a member of the Seismological Society of America, the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute, the American Geophysical Union and Geological Society of Puerto Rico. The Seismological Society members twice elected her as a director (2007 and 2010) and as Vice President of the Society (2009).

Since 2005, she has been a member of the United States delegations to the UNESCO meetings on tsunamis and the oceans. In 2008 she was elected Chair of a UNESCO Working Group on Tsunami Monitoring and Warning Guidance and Other Coastal Hazards Warning System for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions -- encompassing nearly 30 nations in the Caribbean and Americas.

Upon graduation as a geologist of the University of Delaware, von Hillebrandt-Andrade went to Quito, Ecuador as a Fulbright Scholar (1984-1986) and received a master's degree in Geology from the Escuela Politécnica Nacional. She played an important role in monitoring the active volcanoes of this Andean county and co-authored its first volcanic hazard maps as a Research Engineer with the Nacional's Geophysical Institute (1987-1990).